

FACES OF THE REFORMATION

KATHARINA VON BORA

Born: Jan. 29, 1499 | Saxony

Died: Dec. 20, 1552 | Torgau, Germany



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A nun who followed her faith and later became Luther's wife

KATHARINA VON BORA WAS BORN IN SAXONY IN 1499. Not much is known about her family, though recently historians have been researching to learn more about her early life. What is known is that she was born to a family of impoverished nobility and that she was sent to live in a Benedictine convent in Brehna when she was very young, around six. Thus Katharina began her education in a convent school, leading her on the path to becoming a nun.

In 1509, Katharina's father arranged for her to be sent to the Marienthron cloister at Nimbschen, where her aunt was the abbess. Part of the Cistercian order, these nuns lived sparse lives without any luxury and performed manual labor, especially in the field. Katharina lived there as a postulant (candidate for the order) until 1515 when, at the age of 16, she took her vows and became a novice. Katharina took her vows seriously in the coming years, living a life of poverty and manual labor.

In the meantime, Katharina's future husband, Martin Luther, was calling for reform in the church. These writings made their way into the hands of some of the nuns at Marienthron. What impacted Katharina the most from Luther's writings was learning of St. Paul's teachings that grace came from faith alone, not through prayer or works. This inspired Katharina and nine other nuns to escape life in the convent. It took such courage, conviction and an incredible faith for Katharina to take the step to leave the only way of life she had ever known.

When their families were not willing to aid them (for it was against the law to do so), the sisters secretly wrote to Luther for help. He chose to help based on this reasoning: "They permit children to enter the cloister where there is no daily practice of the Word of God and they seldom or never hear the Gospel rightly preached. This is reason enough to have these persons pulled out of the cloister and snatched away by any means possible." Luther enlisted his good friend, Leonhard Koppe, who regularly delivered supplies, including barrels of herring, to the convent. One day, the barrels he left the convent with were still full—of the escaping nuns!

Over the next year, Luther found homes for all of the nuns who had arrived in Wittenburg except one — Katharina. It was then that Katharina, 26, and Luther, 42, were married June 13, 1525. Katharina, often called "Katie" by her husband, became the helpmeet for the reformer. Katharina ran the household for Luther, taking care of the finances and making the former monastery (Black Cloister) where they lived self-sufficient by running a boarding house and brewing beer. This allowed Luther to focus on theological issues and his family. Luther and Katharina had six children, four of whom lived to adulthood. Katharina was invaluable to her husband. Luther once wrote, "I would not exchange my Katie for France or for Venice."

Katharina and Martin developed a love and unending bond. When her husband died Feb. 18, 1546, she was heartbroken. She wrote to her sister-in-law, "My sorrow is so deep that no words can express my heartbreak. ... I can neither eat nor drink, not even sleep."

Life was not easy for Katharina following his death. Luther's last testament was contested, and she had to fight to keep her children and their home. They were also forced to flee twice during the Schmalkaldic Wars. Much of her property was destroyed, and she was impoverished. She once again found herself fleeing Wittenburg with her family in 1552 because of the plague. Then a tragic accident occurred while traveling, and Katharina was seriously injured. She was taken to Torgau where she remained for three months before dying Dec. 20, 1552.

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